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News

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Annual Adoption Day is a joyous formality

By Audora Burg

Sturgis Journal

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CENTREVILLE ...#8221; With a single flourish of the judge's pen, a child went from brother to uncle and a woman was no longer mother, but aunt.

The signed pieces of paper made it legal, but the families and new relationships were formed long ago.

The fourth annual Adoption Day Tuesday at St. Joseph County Probate court celebrated the adoptions of children into five families; in all, 50 adoptions have been finalized in St. Joseph County this year.

Mary Rossman, who represented Michigan Children's Institute, said that statewide there have been more than 10,000 adoptive placements in the last four years.

If only the adoption process were as simple as signing a piece of paper.

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"I really appreciate what adoptive families go through ...#8221; the patience, understanding and sense of humor, and I'm in awe of a child's resilience, to get to this point," Rossman said. "It's not caseworkers who help the children. What helps the child is the safety, love and nurturing they receive in their adoptive home, 24 hours a day, seven days a week," she said.

St. Joseph County Probate Judge Thomas Shumaker paid tribute to families who have opened their homes and their hearts to children through adoption.

"It's good to publicize and give recognition to the families," he said. "It's true ...#8221; extending your family, opening your life to a child."

Whenever possible, adoptive placements are made with families that already have an existing relationship or attachment to the child, Rossman said.

"We value attachment," Shumaker said. "Sometimes a foster parent has kids a long time, then a family member walks in. They say 'that's blood.' That's fine, but in this county, we are an 'attachment' county," he said.

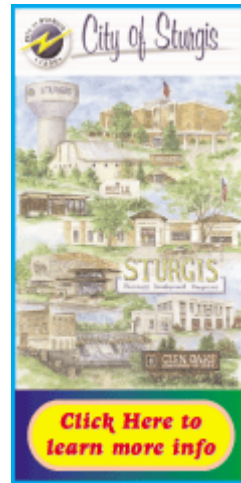
"It's important to recognize how difficult it is to get permanency for some of these kids," Shumaker said. "I say kids aren't like puppies. You can't just put them in a pen in front of the courthouse and let people come pick them out and take them home," he said.

Shumaker gave special recognition to Bernie and Ame Hale, foster parents from Burr Oak, for their especially grueling 30-month challenge of nurturing four siblings into adoption readiness.

"We don't always have that dramatic of a situation. In this case, it was. It's sad, but it's true, and that's what we deal with," Shumaker said.

Then the agenda moved on to the adoption confirmations, "the fun part," he said.

The Thyng family from Sturgis formalized the addition of grandchild number six to their family. She will join



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her older siblings in calling her grandparents by their new titles, "mom" and "dad."

Shumaker introduced the David and Martha Chiddister family as "another situation where you've got grandparents coming to the rescue."

The Chiddisters were in their 15th year of "empty-nesting" when their grandson, Bodhi, came to live with them full-time.

They didn't set out to adopt him; but after his father (their son) died and DHS stepped in to take Bodhi from his mother, they said "Come on in."

"He needs a chance," Martha said. "About like all kids need," David said.

Shumaker related a story to those assembled.

"One time we had a hearing, and I asked 'where's Bodhi?' He's fishing with his Grandpa. That's great ... #8221; that's the bond he didn't have with his mother," Shumaker said.

There's no contact between 9-year-old Bodhi and the woman who is no longer legally his mother.

"Do you want to, Bodhi?" Shumaker asked.

Bodhi shook his head no.

Shumaker recognized the Wendell and Deb Westcomb family from Three Rivers; this year they added six adopted children to their family of seven biological children.

"How many turkeys do you have to have for Thanksgiving?" Shumaker asked.

Wendell said his sister was their inspiration to adopt; she and her husband have three biological and 10 adopted children.

The Westcombs have inspired others.

They told friends who had not been able to conceive again after having their twins, "You should really

consider adoption."

"They met our family. It was something they had never considered," Wendell said.

Westcomb is glad he and his family did.

"They've been a blessing. I can't imagine not having these kids," he said.

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